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AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

While university researchers cannot agree on a model for teaching literature, or even what literary knowing is, the training for literature that prospective elementary teachers receive is totally that of teaching reading. Such education is unrelated to reading and responding to literature. Even when preservice elementary teachers do receive literature training, usually through the English department, the training may in fact teach methods, such as New Criticism, that would be harmful if applied in the elementary school. An extended discussion of a teacher engaging a small group of first-grade readers in a story using a reader response approach shows how students may be taught basic principles of reading and responding to literature while at the same time developing their own capacity to appreciate their personal interpretations of the story and those of their peers. The exercise involved both discussion and written response to a popular children's book. Some basic emphases of reader response criticism are as follows: (1) the approach emphasizes child response, written and oral; (2) rather than answering specific questions dictated by the teacher, the child gives initial, intuitive responses and backs them up using details from the text; (3) rather than approach the text in a scientific manner, the child builds on feelings, memories and associations; and (4) children share written responses with each other instead of just with the teacher. A reader response approach to teaching literature should be part of the language arts/reading education curriculum. (Contains 18 references.) (TB)

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From Literature Based Reading to Reader Response in the Elementary School Classroom

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Robert W. Blake

Department of Education and Human Development

SUNY College at Brockport

Brockport, NY 14420

(716) 395-5554 Work

(716) 395-2172 Fax

66 Lynnwood Drive

Brockport, NY 14420

(716) 637-4210 Home

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From Literature Based Reading to

Reader Response in the Elementary School Classroom

At the present, there is a lot of interest in literature based reading instruction in the elementary grades. Teachers are using trade books to teach reading, and researchers like Tunnell and Jacobs report "stunning levels of success with all types of students and particularly with disabled and uninterested students" (470). The teachers who do use authentic children's books to teach reading, though, are not able to move from literature based reading instruction to teaching literature as literature, through what I am convinced is the most effective and powerful approach, "reader response."

In this paper, I discuss some of the reasons why the majority of elementary school teaches are unable to progress from using literature for teaching reading to employing reader response for teaching literature. In order to illustrate what reader response looks like in an elementary school classroom, I tell how first grade children read and responded to Mercer Mayer's picture book, There's an Alligator Under My Bed (1968). I then describe the elements of reader response, especially for the elementary grades, and include a set of guiding beliefs (assumptions) upon which a reader response model is based.

There are a number of valid reasons why teachers in elementary schools generally do not teach literature through reader response and, in fact, do not teach literature as literature at all. Most of the factors I mention are beyond the control of the classroom teachers, who are certainly not to blame for the current state of affairs. The elementary school teachers I deal with, who have had extensive training with reader response, are able to make use of reader response techniques in their classrooms and are more than pleasantly surprised as they report

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Abstract: A consideration of the reasons why elementary school teachers are unable to move from literature based reading instruction to teaching literature as literature, with an account of how first grade children read and responded to the picture book by Mercer Mayer, There's an Alligator Under My Bed, a description of the elements of reader response, and a set of beliefs (assumptions) upon which reader response is based.

how reader response techniques invigorate the classroom and are directly responsible for children learning how to read and respond to literature as well as helping them become adept at the literacy skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The first reason why elementary school teacher do not use reader response approaches in the classroom is a philosophical one, technically an epistemological matter, a problem dealing with the very nature of knowledge, in this case, what the nature of literary knowing is and how it is intrinsically different from other kinds of knowledge. But the teachers will get little help with this question from philosophers, literary theorists, and researchers trained in literature because scholars have not been able, with few exceptions, to furnish plans for understanding and thus teaching literature which would then be available to elementary school teachers. A few individuals who do provide discussions of the various theories are Bleich (1975), Scholes (1974, 1982, 1988), and Rosenblatt (1938, 1978). Others who help us understand the nature of literary knowing are Gardner (1983), Bruner (1985), and Berscheid (1985). Some persons have produced books on using reader response in the classroom, but the material deals almost entirely with teaching literature at the middle school, high school, and college levels: Probst (1987), Blake (1989, 1991), Karolides (1992) and Nelms (1988).

While university researchers cannot agree on a model for teaching literature, or even with what literary knowing is, the training for literature prospective elementary school teachers receive in colleges and universities is totally that of teaching reading. Such education is unrelated to reading and responding to literature. "In general," reports Sean Walmsley, of the National Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, in a recent report on the contemporary state of elementary literature instruction, "the reading field has seen literature as the end purpose

for learning how to read (i.e. what children do once they have mastered the basic reading skills" (509).

Even though would-be elementary school teachers often do take a course in children's literature, the focus is on an extensive survey of children's books with little attention to valid methods for helping children actually learn how to read and response to literary texts. The children's literature texts are marvelous reference books with breathtakingly beautiful four color illustrations reprinted from children's books, but they almost uniformly neglect teaching literature.

When elementary school teachers do have training in literature, such as that found in most collegiate and university English majors, they still receive no lessons in how to engage children in reading and responding to literature. In fact, the instruction in literature they do receive from English departments may be, in fact, even harmful for their purposes because invariably professors of English view literature historically, especially in survey courses in American and British literature, and if the professors do teach literary interpretation, they operate from a "New Critical" stance, a distorted school version known as "traditional." Such a method, which carries the full weight of authority from college professors and high school English teachers, and from the institutions which support them, teaches students to be objective, rational, inductive, detached, and "scientific," a method particularly ill suited for engaging children in the joyous experience of reading and responding to literature.

So elementary school teachers, from their pre-service collegiate and university education, have had training in the field of reading and frequently also in children's literature, but unfortunately have had little experience with reading and responding to literature. No wonder,

then, that elementary school teachers are reported to be "confused" or "uncertain" about how to deal with the literally hundreds of children's books surging into their classrooms.

No wonder, as Sean Walmsley reports, the elementary school teachers he interviewed for attitudes toward the role of literature in the elementary curriculum had neither "an instructional philosophy for the teaching of literature or a well developed practical scheme for integrating it within the elementary curriculum" (510).

No wonder these teachers saw no purpose for literature activities except that they were "for fun" or they were for teaching reading skills.

No wonder elementary teachers, as well as their supervisors and administrators, have not developed a "coherent, articulated district philosophy with respect to literature's role in the language arts program, across grades, or across different levels of reading and writing ability" (Walmsley, 510).

Even though some elementary school teachers, on the basis of conferences, workshops and articles in professional journal, have been experimenting with literature based reading and whole language literature instruction, they are "uncertain" about how to teach literature by any approach and especially from a reader response orientation. As Judith Langer, also of the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, reports, when she talks about reader response in the elementary grades, she is asked such questions as these: "'Does anything go, and if not, how do I know what to do?' 'Once I get an initial response, what do I do with it?'" (Langer, 203). For Langer, such questions are valid and even predictable, and her observation is that elementary school teachers are not using reader response to teach literature because they have had no education or training equipping them to do so. "The old teaching

routines almost all of us learned in graduate course work and saw modeled in curriculum guides, instructional materials, and assessment instruments don't apply when response-based instruction is the goal" (204).

Reader Response in a First Grade Classroom

Ms. Cleveland, as part of the requirements for the college course, "Reading and Responding to Literature," decides to conduct research with her children in April of their first grade. She plans to find out how well "beginning literature circles" as well as "reading and responding to literature" work with her children. Because the project is new to her and unfamiliar to her students, she chooses four of her independent readers to take part in the study. For an introduction, she calls the children to her desk, asking them whether they would be interested in trying out something unusual in reading. All children are excited and can't wait to begin. Lindsay is a bubbly, highly motivated seven-year-old who enjoys school, especially reading, and, according to her mother, reads everything she can get her hands on. Jolene, also highly motivated, clowns around and finds humor in much of what she works on. Krysten, although shy and quiet, loves to read and write. Bryan, the only boy, is extremely quiet and has to be coaxed to participate. Ms. Cleveland notices, however, that Bryan takes part much more in small groups than he does in the class as a whole. Therefore, since Bryan works well in small groups and since literature circles involve small group behavior, Ms. Cleveland believes Bryan will do well in literature circles.

For her initial discussion with the children, Ms. Cleveland asks them what books they like to read. They tell her and give reasons for choosing their favorites. She also asks them what literature is, and they inform her that literature is something to read.

Her next step is to have these independent readers read, alone and silently, Mercer Mayer's There's an Alligator Under My Bed, (1987). This is an absolutely delightful picture book, both written and illustrated by the author, about a little boy who is convinced there's an alligator under his bed, but, who, when he calls his mom and dad to see it, is disappointed they predictably never do. We know though—and so do the children—that the smiling alligator is a whimsical beast and that the little boy is not only not afraid of the alligator but that he will outwit this sly creature. The cover illustration sets the tone of the book with a picture of the little boy sitting up against the pillow in his bed with a bemused expression—not one of terror—as if to say "Whatever am I going to do with that alligator under my bed!" The alligator, his tail curling out from under the head of the bed and his snout peeking out from underneath the bed's foot, is smiling to himself, as if to say, "How do I continue to play this wonderful game with my friend, this little boy?" Although his parents never see the alligator, the little boy simply knows he's there and decides to lure him out of his bedroom and into the garage with "alligator bait" from the refrigerator, including the "things alligators like to eat." He puts soda and candy next to his bed, cookies in the upstairs hall, fresh vegetables on the stairs and "a peanut butter sandwich, some fruit, and the last piece of pie in the garage." Sure enough, the alligator crawls out from under the bed and eats his way through the house to the garage at which point the boy slams the garage door and locks him in." "There wasn't even any mess to clean up," says the little boy smugly to himself as he marches triumphantly up the stairs to his bedroom. Having outwitted his playmate, the alligator, the little boy lies in bed, wondering whether or not his father "will have any trouble getting in his car tomorrow morning." So he leaves a picture of the alligator and a series of notes to his father on the inside

of the garage door, "Dear Dad There is an alligator in the garage if you need help wake me up." "Warning." "Be careful."

Why shouldn't the children like the book? The little boy splendidly outwits his friendly foe, the alligator, and even offers to help his dad with getting the better of this modern day dragon, if Dad can't handle him.

Now back to the children. After they had read the book silently by themselves, the children came together in a literature circle to talk about what they have read. Here's a verbatim report of the small group discussion by the children and their teacher.

Oral Discussion of Reading

Teacher: What do you think?

Lindsay: It was good.

Teacher: Why was it good? Why was it a good book?

Brian: It was funny.

Teacher: What was the funniest part?

Krysten: When he put all of the food down and wondered if the dad could get in the garage.

Teacher: That was funny! Lindsay. . . ?

Lindsay: When he couldn't walk right up to the bed, he had to walk up a board.

Teacher: He had to be careful, didn't he? Did it tell us in the story that he had to walk up a board?

All: The pictures!

Teacher: What else did you like? . . . Jolene?

Jolene: When the alligator was licking the candy up with his tongue.

Teacher: What else did you like? . . . Lindsay?

Lindsay: I liked the last page when he left a note and spelled the word backwards.

Teacher: He spelled the words backwards, is that OK?

All: Yeah.

Teacher: You could still read it, couldn't you? I have a question for you. Why do you think there was an alligator in the little boy's house? Why was that alligator there? What do you think? . . . Krysten?

Krysten: It was a nightmare.

Teacher: Well, maybe. What do you think, Lindsay?

Lindsay: Because there was some food in the house.

Teacher: Oh, the food in the house! Bryan, what do you think? Why was he there?

Bryan: I think because he liked the warmness.

Teacher: Oh, he liked the warmness in the house. Being in the house instead of being outside.

Jolene: I think he . . . he . . . smelled. . . .

Teacher: He smelled what? What could he smell?

Jolene: Maybe the food in the house.

Teacher: How would you feel if there was an alligator in your house? How would you feel? . . . Bryan?

Bryan: Scared!

Teacher: Why would you be scared? What about that alligator would make you scared?

Bryan: His teeth.

Teacher: His teeth! . . . Lindsay?

Lindsay: He might eat me.

Teacher: He might eat you! . . . Jolene?

Jolene: He might crawl up onto the bed.

Teacher: He might crawl up there on the bed . . . .

Jolene: When I'm sleeping.

Teacher: Oh . . . Krysten?

Krysten: He might crawl under my covers and eat me.

Teacher: Oh, I'd be scared of the alligator, too. Was the alligator in this story scary?

All: No!

Teacher: Was this a scary book?

All: No!

Teacher: Do you think this was a true story?

All: No!

Lindsay: He's smiling!

Teacher: Turn to the page in the book where it says something about the mom and dad. Find that part. Read that page for me.

All: So I called mom and dad.

Teacher: How do you think he called? Did he just say mom and dad? How would you say it, Lindsay?

Lindsay: I'd scream it. "Mom and Dad!"

Teacher: How would he say it, Krysten?

Krysten: MOM AND DAD! ! !

Teacher: What would he tell them? What would you tell them if it was in your house?

Krysten: There's an alligator in my house!

Teacher: Would you say "There's an alligator under my bed"? What would you say?

Krysten: Mom and Dad, there's an alligator under my bed. Please get it out! !

Teacher: Jolene?

Jolene: I'd yell my brains out!

Teacher: Oh, you'd yell loud.

Jolene: Yeah, so the neighbors could hear me.

Teacher: Bryan? Who would you call?

Bryan: My sister.

Teacher: What would you say?

Bryan: . . .

Teacher: Would you say, "Barbara, get in here"? Would you say it real quiet?

Bryan: Yeah, she's just across the hall.

Teacher: Oh. Lindsay?

Lindsay: I'd tell the alligator that I have to go to the bathroom and run into my mom and dad's room!

It's instructive to note in some detail what happened during this small group discussion. Ms. Cleveland opens the discourse by asking them what they think about the book, thus initiating the process of creating their personal meaning for the story. "Why was it good? Why

was it a good book?" she asks. She does not use a list of short answer questions leading to a predetermined interpretation.

"What else did you like?" Ms. Cleveland asks, encouraging the children to continue to explore their motives for liking the book. With the question, "Why was an alligator in the little boy's house?" she goes on with teaching the children how to respond.

When she asks, "How would you feel?" she moves to the feeling response, a basic feature of reader response. What she finds from the children, however, is that an alligator could be scary, this particular alligator, however, is not scary, and that this book is not scary.

Ms. Cleveland, by asking the children to "Turn to the page in the book where it says something about the mom and dad. Find that part. Read that page to me." is teaching them techniques of close reading, about finding evidence from a text to substantiate one's meaning.

And when she asks the children how they would call their mom and dad if there was an alligator under their bed and they practice yelling "MOM AND DAD ! !" she is instructing them unobtrusively how to read literature, how to make sense of the ways an author uses print to show us how to read a story.

In effect, Ms. Cleveland is engaging the children in authentic reader response discussion by prompting them to develop their own interpretation—not finding the teacher's meaning established in advance—by fostering feeling responses, by asking them to use close reading skills, and by generally teaching them sophisticated skills for reading literature.

Now, Ms. Cleveland has her children move to the next stage in the reading and responding process. These are her guidelines for the task.

Written Response Task

> On the piece of paper that I'm going to give you I want you to respond to this question. Writing is responding. Listen. What would you do if there was an alligator in your bedroom? [Hands shoot up.] Don't tell me. I want you to think about it. What would you do if there really was an alligator in your room? Write me that response. You can draw a picture, too.

The children go back to their seats. In about fifteen minutes, they have written a response and drawn a picture for their writing. Here are their verbatim written responses.

Written Responses to There's an Alligator Under My Bed

> If there was an alligator in my bedroom i'd go in the garge and get a slaghamer and then I wood hit the alligator on the hed Then I wood tie the alligators moth up. Then I wood go to sleep The next day I wood go the nerist lake or the nerist pond and thoe him in the pond or lake and then I wood unti him then I wood go home
>
> Bryan

If there was an alligator in my bed room, I would give it all the food it would want. Then I would move to my grammas house. I would leave my mom and dad and my to sister with the alligator

Lindsay

If there was a alligator in my bed room I wood call my mom and Paul to help me. She will probly not beleve me. But I wood keep calling them. If they woodint come I wood take my doll that has a hard heat and hit him.

Krysten

If there was an alligator in my bedroom I would get a chan arod him so he wood not get me. Then I wood say be na-na-na-na-si-si-si-t-t-t-to ma-ma-ma-me. Then I wood call the gose basr [Ghost Busters]. Then I wood tell the gose basr ther is an aligtor under my bed!

Jolene

There are several things we note about these compositions. Very young children are able to create written responses to literature if they are allowed to focus their energies on creating meaning and not on worrying about "correct" spelling, punctuation and capitalization. It's obvious from their discussion and from these written responses, that the children have comprehended what they have read but that they also exhibit an insatiable—yet healthy—desire to process what's in a story as a basis for creating their own original narratives. Bryan will hit

the alligator with a sledgehammer and throw him in a pond, but, with a child's sense of kindness, he would finally untie him. Lindsay would give the alligator all the food he wants, but she would move out of her house, leaving her family to deal with the alligator. And good enough for them! We might surmise. Krysten, who's obviously not afraid of alligators, would hit him with her hardheaded doll. Jolene, in a burst of creativity, puts a chain around his neck, mocks him with a nonsense phrase—sticking out her tongue, we imagine—snaps a rubber band around his mouth, and then calls the Ghost Busters to join her in the fun.

During the process of creating responses to the story, the children learn a great deal about writing. If they are not intimidated by exhortations to write "correctly" they naturally hypothesize about using letters to represent the sounds of English. Because they are expressing meaning they are fearless in their spellings: "slaghammer" for "sledgehammer," "wood" for "would," "heat" for "head," "nerist" for "nearest," "unti" for "untie," "to" for "two," and "woodint" for "wouldn't." They also haven't worked out the conventions of contractions and possessives: "alligators" for "alligator's," "grammas" for "gramma's," and "woodint" for "wouldn't." We need to recognize, however, that the spellings are amazingly logical and consistent.

We know that when children write for meaning, they naturally spell words phonetically, that is, they spell words so as to allow letters simply and accurately to represent the sounds they hear. We also know, from an understanding of the writing process, that mechanical errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are corrected not in an initial draft—which these responses are—but during the final step in writing, the editing stage. We also know that children, with the help of others, are able to correct mechanical errors in writing when they edit.

But we need to emphasize the point here that by being free to create personal meanings in writing, without becoming paralyzed by a fear of making mistakes, children become fluent and effective writers. This facility in writing is another result of writing responses to literature.

With their written responses in hand, they then come back to the whole group. Each person reads her composition out loud, and the others, in turn, respond to the responses. Here is part of their discussion.

Discussion of Written Responses

Teacher: What can you say about each other's response? Talk about it. Louder, I want to hear you! Go ahead. Talk about it.

Jolene: You know what? It was a good idea to have Ghost Busters come.

Teacher: You think it was a good idea for Ghost Busters to come. What do you guys think?

Lindsay: We all laughed. It was really funny!

Teacher: What do you think about Krysten's—tell her what you thought.

Lindsay: It was funny. The doll part. When she hit him.

Teacher: What did you think, Krysten? Whose did you like?

Krysten: Jolene's

Teacher: Why, did you like the Ghost Busters part?

Krysten and Bryan: Yeah!

Teacher: You guys did a really good job today!

Even during this short interaction, the children's exchange exemplifies principles of a learning community. Their remarks provide each child with a reaction to her writing, telling her specifically what she enjoyed, for instance, "It was a good idea to have Ghost Busters come." And the children serve as an immediate audience for each other's effort. "We all laughed. It was really funny." "It was funny—the doll part—when she hit him."

Elements of Reader Response

From an analysis of what Ms. Cleveland and her children do as they read and respond to a worthwhile picture book, we can observe these elements of reader response.

1. Children may experience worthwhile literature in a variety of ways. They listen to stories, read silently, and "read" illustrations.

2. After having experienced a literary text, they discuss in small groups what they have read. As Ms. Cleveland notes, children who are shy in whole groups, feel free to speak up in small groups. At first, since reader response is foreign to the children, the teacher leads discussions by asking questions like these: "How did you like it? Why?" "What do you think about it?" "Tell me about a part of the book that shows why you liked the book." or "Read the part out loud to me." "How did you feel about this book." "Were you scared?"

3. Rather than answering text-oriented questions leading to a previously agreed upon "correct" answer, children pick out details from a story on their own to support their reasons for liking a book. In other words, they choose details to support their meaning.

4. Feelings are an integral part of reader response. Children are encouraged to allow their feelings to arise, the feelings which in turn lead to personal interpretations of stories.

5. Children at almost all ages are able to write out responses to literary texts if certain conditions are met. The teachers must continually reassure the children that the written response is an opportunity for them to relate what the story means essentially to them. At this time in their writing, they need not worry about being "correct," about spelling words correctly or with using punctuation and capitalization correctly or, and this is most vital, they need not worry about finding what the teacher believes the correct meaning to be. Only by being continually inspired to write out the fundamental meaning of literary texts do children develop confidence in interpreting literature, ultimately becoming courageous readers.

6. Just as writing is a necessary part of reader response, the small and large group discussions are also an integral aspect of reader response. Such group work is variously known as "lit circles," discussion groups, and cooperative learning. Because what occurs, though, during these student discussions goes beyond such activities, what happens during reader response discussion reflects a "learning community." If a learning community is to grow, each child must be responsible for a task, in this case, reading and responding orally and in writing to literature. Each child reads her response in a small group. The initial group necessarily must be small—three to four children—for several reasons. Shy children, who are afraid to contribute in a large group but who invariably have something worthwhile to say, feel more confident in small groups. Within the small group, all children have an opportunity to listen closely and to speak out with carefully considered ideas. The learning community, as well as allowing for reading and writing, also is the chief vehicle for children to practice other skills of listening and speaking.

As the children listen to the responses of other children and become bolder about making comments, each child's individual interpretation is validated and enriched. Furthermore, as children interact within groups, they come to know each other intimately, learning not to attack, criticize negatively, or to make fun of others but rather learning how to provide helpful reactions, pointing out parts they liked and asking for more information; in short, they become responsible for helping their classmates become literate. They learn how to teach others to become helping, ethically accountable individuals, what I call "trusted readers." Under the conditions of the learning community, through reading and responding to literature, children also internalize what psychologists like Ellen Berscheid calls social knowledge and social skills (1985) and Howard Gardner terms the personal intelligences (1983).

Guiding Beliefs (Assumptions) Underlying Reader Response

A word about beliefs (assumptions). Whatever we do as individuals and however we act as teachers are the direct result of the ideas we hold dear in our hearts. If I believe that my aim in interpreting literature is to find the "correct" meaning, then I need to find the right meaning of a story or poem—usually discovered by an acclaimed teacher or presented in a textbook—and my teaching approach focuses on asking children questions which lead to this preconceived meaning. On the other hand, if I believe the chief purpose in teaching literature is for children to create their own personal meanings, I provide experiences for them to learn how to create, not find, personal meanings for literature.

Here then are some of the guiding beliefs which form the foundation for reader response.

1. Primary Emphasis on the Reader's Response. Rather than emphasizing the text, the primary emphasis in reader response is on the child's oral or written response to that text, with the sophisticated help from an especially trained and sympathetic teacher.

2. Child Chooses Details to Support her Meaning. Rather than answering specific questions dictated by a teacher about parts of a literary text, the child gives an initial, intuitive response and then chooses details to support her interpretation, based upon an intimate knowledge of literary elements.

3. Intuition, Feeling, Memories, and Associations are Allowed during Interpretations. Rather than approaching a literary text in an objective, detached, and essentially "scientific" manner, the child builds upon feelings, memories and associations as the essential matter of her personal response.

4. Children Read and Respond within a Learning Community. Rather than sharing workbook sheets with the teacher only, the child shares her personal response with other children in small groups and with the whole class, including the teacher, within a learning community. Each child thus sees her individual response grow, become enriched, and sanctioned by the responses from all other children and by the teacher.

Even though university scholars trained in literature have not provided a commonly agreed upon model for teaching literature, even though those individuals trained in the field of reading see literature chiefly as a means for teaching reading, even though those who write children's literature books intend them to be chiefly resource books, and even though those college and university professors who do teach literature to pre-service elementary school teachers use a "New Critical" approach, one poorly suited for use with elementary school

children, I sense an evolving model for teaching literature in the elementary schools, that of "reader response." The main features are now being worked out, along with a set of guiding beliefs, an understanding of what children experience as they move through the process of reading and responding, and a beginning repertoire of appropriate activities. Furthermore, we have considerable evidence that teachers can learn how to teach reader response, and we enjoy surprisingly optimistic evidence that elementary school children at all ages can indeed employ reader response techniques and profit markedly from the experiences. It is increasingly evident to me that a reader response approach to teaching literature should be a valid part of the language arts/reading program and that literary knowing is a field of study important in its own right and deserves to become an integral part of all children's schooling.

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